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DE RUEHAK #2129/01 3521525

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FM AMEMBASSY ANKARA

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 8251

INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE

RHMFIS/EUCOM POLAD VAIHINGEN GE

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ANKARA 002129

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/05/2018

TAGS: PGOV PHUM PREL OSCE TU

SUBJECT: TURKEY: SIX MILLION NEW VOTERS CAN'T BE WRONG

Classified By: POL Counselor Daniel O'Grady for reasons 1.4(b,d)

**¶1.** (SBU) Summary: Controversy is swelling in Turkey surrounding a new voter registration system that has added six million additional registered voters to the voter lists in the runup to the 2009 local elections, fueling speculation of political manipulation. Critics of the new system charge that it is based on a flawed new national census system, rendering the new voter list unreliable. They also argue that transferring the primary authority for tabulating registered voters from the nominally independent Supreme Election Board (YSK) to the Ministry of Interior has politicized the process. Opposition parties, suspicious that the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) is somehow using the new system to its advantage, may initiate a legal challenge to it if they assess that it will significantly harm them at the polls. For their part, the YSK and MoI defend the new figures as more accurate, claim the new system is less prone to error, and insist that any vulnerabilities it has were shared by the old system. Even without legal action the controversy is sure to ratchet up tension in the pre-election environment. End summary.

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New Census System  
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**¶2.** (U) Prior to 2008, the government used an archaic system to compile a national census. Every five years, the State Statistics Institute sent state officials -- teachers, bureaucrats, and the like -- to homes across the country to ask demographic questions. The Institute tabulated the results in a non-computerized form. This system put a high burden on Turks by making them stay at home, and was thought to be unreliable. Under a new system established in the late 1990s, the GOT gave responsibility for conducting the census to the Ministry of Interior Populations Directorate General. Under the new system, residents are no longer required to stay at home on a particular day. Instead, over a period of months, the DG sends government bureaucrats door to door, collecting pertinent demographic data. If a resident happens to be not home during the visit, the DG in practice does not record data for that household (itself a source of criticism). The DG released results of the first census based on this system on January 21, 2008.

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New Voter Registration System Launched  
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**¶3.** (U) At the time the new census system came into being,

there was no discussion about using the system for voter registration purposes for Turkish elections. Voter registration was done through a wholly different process: Turkey's Supreme Election Board (YSK) prepared voter registration lists in conjunction with the office of the local muhtar (district official). Prior to an election, the YSK would deliver a list of registered voters to the muhtar's office, which would post it for local residents to review. Residents could update their information and raise objections with the muhtar's office.

**¶4.** (U) On March 13, 2008, Parliament added a line item to a bill that allowed voters who resided outside of Turkey to register. The line item replaced the old voter registration system with a new one requiring the Ministry of Interior Population DG to tabulate voter registration based on the new census system. Although officials did not explain the reason for the change, the few journalists and analysts who covered the issue at the time speculated that it was an attempt to modernize and streamline the old voter registration system. Because of the innocuous mechanism by which the change was introduced, the new system attracted little attention.

**¶5.** (U) Until now. In preparing voter registration lists for March 2009 local elections, the Population DG used the new system for the first time. Using 2008 census data, the DG announced in late November that the number of eligible voters for March 2009 local elections is 48,265,644 -- six million more voters than were on the list the YSK compiled in 2007 under the old system. General confusion and debate ensued.

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Critics Bash New System...  
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**¶6.** (U) One of the lead critics, Tarhan Erdem, President of KONDA polling company and "Radikal" columnist, believes the main flaw is that the new voter registration system relies on a new census system that is itself flawed. Under the new census system, a resident may give false information to the surveyor, who is not obliged to check information with the detailed information the muhtar's office maintains, according to Erdem. He said that another possible problem is that surveyors often encounter an empty household and fail to return later to assess the data. The election voter registration system should not rely on such flawed data without allowing residents and local officials the opportunity to correct the flaws. Erol Tuncer, director of the Foundation for Social, Economic and Political Studies (TESEV), said the overnight increase of six million voters seems to demonstrate a mistake of some sort in the new system.

**¶7.** (U) Another main complaint is that the new system takes authority from the independent YSK and gives it to the political MOI, leaving the system vulnerable to political manipulation. Erdem maintains that this is unconstitutional because the Turkish constitution designates the YSK as the appropriate institution to prepare voter registration lists. Aside from its legal flaws, he worries that the government and political parties can affect voter registration results by manipulating the census. Erdem believes that government-employed census takers may already have double registered many voters who maintain separate urban and village residences.

**¶8.** (U) Opposition parties also expressed concern that the government could manipulate votes under the new system. Main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) leader Deniz Baykal said at his party's December 2 parliamentary group meeting that the new system takes authority to review challenges from the judiciary and puts it in the hands of civil servants and bureaucrats "who cannot be controlled." Baykal called on the government to explain to the public specifically how the number of voters increased by 6 million.

CHP MP Kemal Anadol told reporters that AKP is attempting to manipulate statistics to allow AKP supporters to vote in jurisdictions where AKP is polling poorly. Opposition Nationalist Action Party (MHP) whip Oktay Vural further alleged that, according to the Turkish Statistics Institute, previous Ministry of Interior population statistics were also suspiciously high, in part because of a large number of citizens who were incorrectly issued two separate citizenship identification numbers. CHP MP Bulent Tanla warned that "dark clouds will be cast on free elections in Turkey."

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... And the Authorities Defend It  
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¶9. (C) On December 19, we discussed the new system with Yilmaz Arslan, Secretary General at the Ministry of Interior. He claimed that the debate in the press is over-simplified. The new system does not, for instance, transfer authority for voter rolls from the YSK; instead, the YSK is working together with the MoI and State Statistics Bureau to devise a more accurate list, which the YSK will then examine and register. The MoI's numbers are better than the previous list, he claims; the system is not based entirely on census results, but, more accurately, on each voter's citizenship number. The database uses the census as a baseline, but also counts and registers voters as they interact with the state: registering births, marriages, and deaths; buying property; registering children at school; drawing benefits from the state; or signing up for military service, for example. This passive collection will thereby "catch" disinterested voters who did not protest when they were left off the voting rolls in the previous election, voters living overseas, and newly-eligible voters who have not otherwise actively registered, amongst others (Note: under Turkish electoral law, voting is mandatory; failure to vote carries a nominal monetary penalty). The new system should also be self-correcting by its very nature, he said.

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10 (C) Arslan conceded that an organized group of people could change their residences immediately prior to the election in the hopes of swaying a particular township, but argued that this was also possible under the previous system, and because the new system ties a person's vote to a citizenship number, that person would be unable to vote in two constituencies, a flaw of the old system. Arslan confessed that he was unaware of allegations that some citizens have two citizenship numbers, but he argued that with a population of over 70 million people, even a small, statistically acceptable margin of error will produce nominally large errors, and that these would be gradually corrected by the very nature of how the registry data are collected. The YSK President Muammer Aydin summed up this argument in the press, telling reporters that the new system is preferable because it is the state, rather than individuals, that makes sure everyone is registered. He dismissed charges that the MOI would be biased, stating, "Who shall we trust if not a state institution?"

¶11. (C) Comment: The concern over the new election roll system is not really the sudden appearance of six million new voters, but instead the possibility that the new system may be manipulated for political purposes. As Arslan describes the new system, it appears that fears of double-counting, ghost voters, and partiality are over-blown. But if the responsible authorities are unable to make their case convincingly, the perception of malfeasance will linger over local elections next March, and in the future -- opening the door to challenges from candidates who lose by slim margins. These would be adjudicated by the YSK, whose decisions cannot be appealed. Local elections on a national scale could produce a myriad of such challenges, which could leave a number of cities and provinces without leaders for a considerable time. On the other hand, it is far better to

test the new system in local elections than in parliamentary elections, where legal challenges could theoretically paralyze the national government.

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Jeffrey